

UAW pushes local deals past opposition at GM Lordstown plant

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After barely overcoming rank-and-file resistance to the national agreements it signed with General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler last fall, the United Auto Workers (UAW) has sought to shut down potential struggles at factories where local agreements have not been reached.

Local contracts address working conditions inside the factories, the use of temporary workers and outside contractors, job classifications and other issues not under the national UAW agreements.

After the 2011 agreements, the UAW had a hard time pushing through local deals at a number of factories, including a Fiat Chrysler plant in Dundee, Michigan, where workers opposed forced overtime and other measures pushed by the UAW by designating the engine facility for “critical plant status.” At several factories, the UAW simply stopped negotiating and ordered workers to continue laboring without local agreements, in some cases for years.

During the 2015 round, the UAW tried to get workers to ratify local agreements along with the national contract, hoping that signing bonuses and the intense focus on the national agreement would allow the union to push through local concessions.

However, many factories have remained without an agreement, including until recently, GM’s massive Lordstown complex near Youngstown, Ohio, where 4,150 assembly and stamping workers produce the Chevy Cruze and Buick Verano models.

Workers at the facility are angered over health and safety conditions, unbearable workloads due to manpower shortages, low-paid temporary workers being prevented from becoming full-time employees, medical coverage, the lack of proper areas to take breaks and filthy bathrooms.

Since small car models are less profitable than pickup trucks and SUVs, GM, with the full backing of the UAW, subjects workers to relentless speedup in the factory where similar conditions provoked wildcat strikes in the early 1970s. At one of GM’s most productive North American plants, factory workers churned out 299,227 Cruze compact cars last year, an increase of 4.5 percent from the 2014 total,

according to the Automotive News Data Center.

UAW officials completely ignore workers’ concerns. “You cannot get a grievance filed,” a Lordstown worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. “The UAW reps won’t file them. They probably get a bonus or kickback if they file the lowest number of grievances. If the reps see workers who want to file grievances they will turn the other way.”

Instead, local officials are boasting that they are opening a new UAW-GM Learning Center at the factory and that they are sending a new flock of “team leaders” to the UAW Black Lake Education Center where they will be trained to crack the whip and victimize resistant workers.

Last January, workers at the complex in Ohio voted overwhelmingly to strike if no local agreement was reached. According to the Facebook page of Local 1112, which covers 3,000 assembly workers at Lordstown East, the local sent a five-day strike letter to UAW Region 2-B Director Ken Lortz on January 8. A local flier said the company’s demands “are examples of Management trying to take away everything that is important to our membership and weaken this local union. This will not be tolerated by your leadership.”

The last thing UAW International and local union officials wanted was a local strike that could rekindle the festering anger of rank-and-file workers who continue to fume over the national sellout agreements the UAW rammed through at GM, Ford and Chrysler. The UAW immediately intervened in the local talks to get the contract through.

Nevertheless, on February 23, 55 percent of the skilled trades workers on the assembly side voted down the local deal, while production workers approved it. Skilled trades workers also rejected the UAW-GM national contract but the UAW simply ran roughshod over its own constitution—which requires ratification by both skilled and production workers—to ram it through.

Local 1112 officials announced they would follow the “same protocol as national contract ratification” and would hold “informational gathering meetings on March 1 “about why our division 2 team members rejected the local

agreement.”

In the words of one skilled tradesman at the factory, at these meeting UAW officials simply said they would “keep lines of communication open with the company” about the skilled workers concerns, and then promptly announced the deal would be put in place.

At UAW Local 1714, which covers 1,400 stamping and janitorial workers at Lordstown West, 52 percent of production workers voted to reject the local contract on February 11, while skilled trades workers approved the deal. This time, the UAW announced that there would be no strike because the deal had passed the combined vote by a 31-vote margin. Instead, the UAW would hold a “re-vote” of production workers only.

Afterwards, the local’s Facebook page declared, “Due to the fact that the majority (Division 1) voted against ratification and the minority (Division 2) voted to ratify, the Shop Committee, along with encouragement from the UAW International, has chosen to re-vote on the Tentative Local Agreement. The Shop Committee’s expectations for ratification are for both divisions to pass the Tentative Agreement.”

The local organized “inquiry meetings” on February 18 to supposedly survey workers about what issues to “discuss with management.” Meanwhile, the UAW International announced a 10-day ratification deadline extension, approved by Lordstown management, from March 4 to March 14.

The delay, the local claimed, would allow “the Membership time to understand the changes/additions toward the Tentative Local Agreement.” The UAW decided not to hold any “roll-out” meetings for workers to question them on the supposedly redrafted deal and instead local officials handed out a “Shop Flyer” during the March 10-11 votes, which contained sugar-coated “highlights” and proclamations that the deal included “no concessions.”

The local made it clear that another rejection would not lead to a strike. Instead it wrote, “If no resolution can be accomplished locally, the issues will be forwarded to UAW International Parties.” In other words, if rejected, the UAW would force workers to vote again and again until they got it right! On March 4, UAW officials met with “team leaders” to push the sellout through.

Under these conditions, stamping and janitorial workers reluctantly ratified the deal by a 61-39 percent margin.

Workers on the shop floor are concerned that both workers and the factory are being run to the ground in anticipation of a possible closure of the plant. In order to boost the profits of the Big Three automakers, the new UAW national agreements sanction the shifting of small car production to lower-wage GM plants in Mexico.

The UAW rejects out of hand any fight to unify US, Mexican and Canadian workers to defend the right to a good-paying and secure job for all workers in North America and the rest of the world. Therefore, if the UAW is to convince the automakers to retain any small car production in the US it will be by helping GM brutally slash the wages and benefits of current and future workers, while brutally increasing exploitation.

“Instead of buying new parts for the stamping presses in need of repair, they strip parts from working presses and shut down production lines,” a Lordstown worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. “There are not enough people, not enough parts and management tells skilled trades to fix things the way they want, not the right way. Then they have to re-fix it the right way taking twice as long.

“I think it’s sabotage because they plan to close the plant. There are 2,000 new cars parked in the back because the trunks leak and they still have not fixed the problem. There is a shortage of workers in the plant because older workers are retiring and not being replaced. They were supposed to bring in temporary workers to fill in but the company did not want to transform the current laid-off temp workers into full-time workers. They want to keep them as temps and pay them less.

“As far as safety, if there is any way they can get a repair done without shutting down the line they will do it. Stamping workers are required to move large dies but the equipment is not suited for it. When you’re crawling in a press anything can happen and a hard hat won’t help. I’m amazed a terrible accident hasn’t already happened. You can only roll the dice so many times.

“Even the bathrooms are disgusting, and, if they can, workers avoid going for eight hours until they get home. The local union officials say they won’t ‘tolerate’ these conditions. The UAW pays its people to cover this up. Anytime there is a mess it does not come out of company’s multibillion-dollar profits but out of the wages, jobs and pensions of workers.”



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